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SUBJECT: SPAIN: TOUR D'HORIZON WITH FORMER PRESIDENT AZNAR

REF: BARCELONA 148

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Classified By: Amb. Eduardo A. Aguirre for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador hosted former President Jose Maria Aznar for a private lunch at his residence on October 16. President Aznar offered his opinions on the domestic political situation as well as the outlook in Latin America. He also told Ambassador of his satisfaction at seeing improved United States-Spain relations, despite the difficulties this presents to his party in opposition. He told the Ambassador that he fears the current government is presiding over the "Balkanization" of Spain. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During their October 16 luncheon, former President Aznar told the Ambassador that he views with satisfaction the improving GOS relationship with the U.S. over the past year. Aznar said that, as a Spaniard, he accepts this as a positive development although it presents difficulties for his opposition Partido Popular (PP). (COMMENT: Maintaining the trans-Atlantic relationship has long been one of the PP's key platforms, and PP leaders have hammered Zapatero for upsetting ties with Washington. The PP has also criticized the Zapatero government for steps it has taken that are important to the U.S., such as the Spanish deployment to Afghanistan and Lebanon. While efforts to improve the bilateral relationship have eased the sting of this PP criticism, PP leaders apparently have viewed U.S.-Spain tensions as favorable to their interests. Aznar's comments may reflect a new approach on this subject. We have told both the PP and the Socialist Party now in power to avoid using the U.S. in their political football, as this benefits neither Spanish nor U.S. interests. END COMMENT.)

//Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Mexico//

¶3. (C) Aznar told the Ambassador about his recent speaking tour in Latin America. He found that Argentina is increasingly turning inward and that internal politics will be the dominant force in Argentina for several years. In Chile, he told the Ambassador that President Bachelet is strongly influenced by her father's murder and her own torture during the Pinochet regime. Aznar said that these experiences are more profoundly shaping her executive decisions than he had previously believed. On Peru, Aznar expressed his belief that Alan Garcia is a "new man" who has cast aside the legacy of his previous administration and who is deeply committed to creating stability and economic opportunity. He also said that President Uribe appears very

secure and established in Colombia. Aznar saw deep internal divisions in Mexico, but he noted that the U.S. border fence project is a unifying force of anti-American sentiment, to the detriment of U.S. relations with Mexico.

//ETA, Basque Country and Catalonia//

¶4. (C) Aznar said he fears that the GOS is presiding over the "Balkanization" of Spain, by allowing the autonomous communities greater independence. The PP feels that by allowing the 2006 Catalonia referendum on autonomy, the GOS has opened the floodgates to demands for greater local control. Worse, by entering into negotiations with ETA, the GOS has nearly legitimized the Basque self-determination movement. Aznar expressed his belief that the ongoing ETA negotiations will fail. He said that the only way to deal with ETA is as a criminal organization. The negotiations never had a chance for success, he said, because neither side ever had any room to maneuver or flexibility in their positions. According to Aznar, ETA will never abandon its demand for Basque self-determination, and the GOS can never agree to that demand.

¶5. (C) Adhering to the party line, Aznar expressed confidence that the PP would win a slim plurality in the approaching Catalonia regional election. NOTE: Polling indicates that the Catalan "middle of the road" CiU party is likely to win the regional election, though it may have to form a tripartite coalition to govern (reftel). The PP is not even assured a place in that coalition, as it currently is polling at around 10 percent in the region. END NOTE.

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